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Postcolonial Entanglements: Performing Shakespeare and Kathakali in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello*

In a recent, polemical article on the vogue for intercultural Shakespeare in contemporary Western theatre, Ania Loomba adopts Rustom Bharucha's well-known theses on interculturalism to argue that "Shakespeare has become the means of marketing an exoticized Third World, Orient, or Africa, to the West".[1] Focusing on Shakespearean productions which appropriate what they see as 'authentic' Indian performance traditions such as Kathakali, she shows how often in these productions interculturalism becomes synonymous with Orientalism (in its globalized form). However, she maintains that "we must remain open to the possibilities of truly intercultural work" (*SP*, 135), by which she means "work" by non-Western artists in which "Shakespeare remains 'in' Indian theatre and culture, and continues to be a medium for facilitating new kinds of Indian performances" (*SP*, 136).

One of the examples of "truly intercultural work" which Loomba mentions, Arjun Raina's *The Magic Hour*, is also the show which inspired the making of *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*) (2002),[2] a short 'experimental' film by Indian director and archeologist/anthropologist Ashish Avikunthak.[3] As Avikunthak explains in the following "Interview", the film centres around Raina's performance, and borrows the innovative mix of Shakespeare, Kathakali and street/folk theatre – what Raina dubs "khelkali" – which characterizes *The Magic Hour* (fig.1).

Fig.1: Arjun Raina as Kathakali dancer in Ashish Avikunthak's Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali), 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

The film also incorporates the political agenda that informs this hybrid juxtaposition of artistic styles. In *Dancing Othello*, like in *The Magic Hour*, Shakespearean theatre and Kathakali dance (two cultural artefacts which date back to approximately the same historical period) continually interact with each other. Yet they do so not only as artistic forms but also, and perhaps mainly, as powerful emblems of cultural authority which inscribe themselves on, and deeply affect, the body and psyche of the (post) colonial subject.[4] This interaction is inseparable from displacement: through the medium of the body of the actor each of these forms is drawn into the orbit of the other, which puts under erasure notions of 'purity' and authenticity, which concern them both in different ways: Kathakali as the expression of authentic India;

[1] Ania Loomba, "Shakespeare and the Possibilities of Postcolonial Performance", in Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen, eds., *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 124. Herafter cited as *SP*.

[2] "Brihnnlala was the name Arjun, one of the five Pandava brothers of Mahabharata, took in the thirteenth year of their exile. In this year they were supposed to be in disguise as part of their agreement with Kauravas. Arjun turned himself into a eunuch who was royal dancing teacher at the court of Virat." (Personal communication from the director, 5 January 2010.)

[3] I'm using 'experimental' in inverted commas because of Avikunthak's interest in re-defining 'experimental cinema' – a Western category – as Cinema of Prayoga. This expression was coined by film critic Amrit Gangar. See <http://www.vertigomagazine.co.uk/showarticle.php?sel=bac&siz=1&id=605>, 20 January 2011. Ashish Avikunthak divides his time between India and the United States. For his variegated filmography, and reviews of his work, see Avikunthak's personal website: <www.avikunthak.com>, 20 January 2011.

[4] Arjun Raina's website describes *The Magic Hour* as "a play about the effects of colonization, about the duality of self in the colonized, about the brokenness that results from the duality, both of the actor as well as the story telling aesthetic" (<http://www.arjunraina.com/Magichour.htm>, 20 January 2011).

Shakespeare as the essence of the West and the embodiment of universal values, and so on. But this process of politically-motivated hybridisation goes one step further, since both Shakespeare and Kathakali are subsequently brought into contact with a form of street theatre which is 'alien' to them. Alien, of course, because they have both been construed, as Avikunthak specifies in the "Interview", as "classical"/ canonical and thus in opposition to 'lower' forms of performance.

It is worth exploring a little the section of the film when street theatre emerges most forcefully. It is shot in black and white, as if to mark the shift to a 'bare' modality of performance. In this section of the film, Arjun Raina re-appears without the elaborate costumes of a Kathakali dancer which he wears, at least in part,[5] in other scenes of the film. He re-presents himself as the 'comedic', 'ex-centric' Peter Pillai, who simulates the immediacy of street theatre by speaking directly to the camera/audience (fig. 2).

He passes ironic comments on the (post)colonial predicament: "Everywhere I'm going… in America, Australia, Britain…, everybody's asking me 'Mr Pillai, how come you speak such good English?' 'Sir, British ruling over India two hundred years… setting up very fine English institutions.'"[6] Furthermore, he enacts his own brand of postcolonial mimicry – his *partial* presence as half British half Indian storyteller[7] – by elaborating on a well-known English nursery rhyme and tongue twister. Peter Pillai doubles his double (i.e., Peter Piper) as follows: "Peter Piper picks a peck of pickled peppercorn; / If Peter picks a peck of pickled peppercorn, / Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picks?" Significantly, the "Prologue" to this highly ironic street act is yet another act of mimicry. It corresponds almost *verbatim* to the "Prologue" to the mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Fig. 2: Arjun Raina as Peter Pillai speaking to the camera in Ashish Avikunthak's Dancing Othello *(Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

> Sir, if we offend, sir, it is with our good will, sir.
> That we come not to offend,
> But with good will. To show our simple skill, sir
> That is the true beginning of our end.
> We come not in despite
> As minding to content you,
> Our true intent is all for your delight
> Sir, Madam, we are not here that you should here repent you,
> We are not here that you should here repent you,

[5] See the "Interview": "The classical Kathakali performance consists of stylised costumes, intricate make-up and usage of elaborate masks, whereas Arjun just wears a kurta, jeans and trousers with perfunctory make up".

[6] On these political comments, see Loomba, "Shakespeare and the Possibilities", 134-5. She also comments on the changes to the show Raina introduces when he performs in different parts of the world.

[7] On partial presence and mimicry, see especially Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

The actors are at hand and by their show, sir,
You are like to know whatever you're like to know.[8]

One can therefore argue, from a somewhat "Shakespeare-centric" perspective,[9] that not only is Shakespeare made to interact with street theatre; Shakespeare is made to approximate the language of street theatre so closely as to become almost indistinguishable from it. In other words, Shakespeare is *not quite* Shakespeare. The Shakespearean corpus is not quite the classical/canonical corpus one may think it is. The act of postcolonial mimicry touches on the internal dissident margin of Shakespeare's language. It (re)marks the inassimilable trace of alterity within the Shakespearean corpus, the spectral remainder which haunts classical/canonical versions of Shakespeare. Moreover, Peter Pillai's ir/reverent, repeated, mode of address ("Sir"; and, occasionally, "Madam") ironically evokes what his act of mimicry puts into question. It implicitly but powerfully reminds the viewer of the position of authority which in the original play is occupied by Theseus, Lysander, Hippolita and again Theseus, as they in turn react to the "Prologue" to the mechanicals' play. For these characters, Quince, who speaks the "Prologue", "doth not stand upon points"; he "knows not the stop"; his speech is out of tune, "a sound, but not in government"; it is, for the Duke, "like a tangled chain: nothing impaired, but all disordered" (5.1.123-5).

I want to argue that in *Dancing Othello* these positions of authority (and especially the Duke's) allegorise the elitist, dominant construction of Shakespeare – and Kathakali – as classical/canonical, and that what is enunciated from these positions undergoes a 'radical' transformation, and even a reversal, which makes negatively connoted terms speak differently. In other words, in the film what is out of joint, 'tangled', or discordant is *asserted* as an ethico-political and artistic force. It is *affirmed* as a force, the film seems to be saying, without which one cannot adequately respond to the complexities of the (post)colonial present. This comes close to what Avikunthak argues in the "Interview" concerning the lack of linear narrative in *Dancing Othello*. He points out that he is interested in "disjunctural narrative", a narrative that is "at the verge of non-narrative – it is halting, interrupted, digressive and the meaning is located in parenthesis within parenthesis".

"Disjunctural narrative" prevails in the film. It is a mode of narration which draws attention to the film's distinctive cinematic logic, a logic which re-marks and transforms the hybrid logic of *The Magic Hour*: *Dancing Othello* is *not* merely a documentary film about Arjun Raina's show. For instance, within the first three minutes of the film, we move from the facial and hand gestures of Arjun Raina performing 'live' a Kathakali-style *Othello* (or an *Othello*-style Kathakali), to the faces and daily gestures of ordinary people in a crowded street market, while still hearing lines from act five of *Othello*. This back and forth movement is in turn interspersed with a dizzying speeded-up sequence in which a mysterious character with a gas mask – a disjunction within the disjunction – helps Raina with his elaborate Kathakali headdress.[10] This is followed by the Peter Pillai street act I have already commented

[8] I'm transcribing the original: "If we offend, it is with our good will. / That you should think, we come not to offend, / But with good will. To show our simple skill, / That is the true beginning of our end. / Consider then we come but in despite. / We do not come, as minding to contest you, / Our true intent is. All for your delight / We are not here. That you should here repent you, / The actors are at hand; and by their show, / You shall know all, that you are like to know" (5.1.108-17). All citations from the play are from the Alexander edition of *The Complete Works* of Shakespeare, and are included parenthetically in the text.

[9] "Shakespeare-centric", which indicates a centripetal movement toward the Shakespearean textual corpus, is Richard Burt's coin. See Richard Burt, "Introduction: Shakespeare, More or Less? From Shakespeareccentricity to Shakespearecentricity and Back", in Richard Burt, ed., *Shakespeares after Shakespeare. An Encyclopedia of the Bard in Mass Media and Popular Culture*, vol.1 (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 1-9.

[10] The repeated sequences with the street market were shot for another film, as Avikunthak explains in the "Interview", so also in this sense they bear the mark of a different temporality which combines with the simulation of 'present' live performance and the odd temporality of fast-motion sequences.

on. Before the re-appearance of Peter Pillai as a semi-serious Kathakali instructor, we witness another fragment of Kathakali Shakespeare, with Raina singing Oberon's lines from act 3 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a performance which is preceded and followed by the actor's extensive exploration of a space which is none other than *the director's* own home in Kolkata. We are also intermittingly made privy to Raina putting on his Kathakali costumes and/or applying make up for a performance we have already seen or are about to see (fig.3).

In the meanwhile, scenes from the street market keep re-appearing.

Disjunctural narrative – with its conspicuous juxtaposition of spaces and temporalities – is of course part of the 'deconstruction' of Shakespeare and Kathakali as cultural icons which I stressed earlier. In the "Interview" Avikunthak also mentions the "optical methods" he used in *Dancing Othello* to create a superimposition of images – what he calls "disjunctural imagery". He probably refers to two sequences in the film in which a close-up of Raina performing Kathakali Shakespeare is superimposed upon images from the street market. This experiment produces a sense of disorientation in the viewer. It is an experiment in "haptic visuality".[11] It makes visible the *body* of the film – its texture, its skin – and imbues the images with a spectral quality (fig.4).

Fig.3: Arjun Raina applying make-up in in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

It is a superimposition, moreover, which somehow *touches* the viewer and makes him/her alert to the fact that images are not simply a matter of visibility. It eludes and frustrates the viewer's attempt to *fully* grasp the image and make it his/her own. In a sense, it *literalises* the film's broader logic of juxtaposition. It registers in the realm of *affect* the cultural/aesthetic/political/work the film performs at the level of meaning (e.g., its 'deconstruction' of Kathakali and Shakespeare through a number of uncanny juxtapositions).

The realm of affect *matters* also because of the director's decision to shoot the film in his own home in Kolkata, a place which is clearly saturated with personal memories and which will

Fig.4: Spectral superimposition in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

[11] On "haptic visuality", from a perspective which is influenced by both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, see especially Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999) and Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

also be the location for another short film, *Antaral/Endnote* (2005), a strikingly beautiful adaptation of Beckett's "dramaticule" *Come and Go* (1965). Shakespeare and Kathakali are thus allowed to 'invade' this most intimate of places but they are in turn inevitably 'contaminated' by this encounter: they begin to speak the language of what is quotidian. This fits in with Avikunthak's wider artistic/cinematic project – from his early tetralogy *Et Cetera* (1997) through *Kalighat Fetish* (1999) to his stunning *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010) – of letting the ritual quasi-mythical quality of everyday life emerge; of letting the 'ordinary' continually re-mark itself in its singularity as 'extra-ordinary'. This project has far-reaching implications for the inscription of the religious aspects of Kathakali in *Dancing Othello*. In the "Interview" Avikunthak underlines, as other critics have done (Loomba, *SP*, 126-7), that in pre-modern times Kathakali was exclusively performed in religious contexts, and that it was forced to break away from this context to become a form of classical *secular* theatre. (One may want to add to this that it has increasingly become an 'object' of cultural consumption and tourism.) One could argue, with Avikunthak, that here in the film the religious aspect which was integral to Kathakali re-presents itself as the religiosity which permeates the seemingly banal gestures of everyday life, and that this 'ordinary' religiosity is at odds with the religious rhetoric of the Hindu right and other prevailing forms of religion in the postcolony. As Avikunthak points out, "today public discourse about religion [in India] is either in the hands of the political right, the priestly class or the television evangelists". This 'reconstruction' of Kathakali (whose counterpart is the re-emergence of the Shakespearean corpus as *other* than it predominantly is) can also be seen as part of the director's own search for "the meaning of being religious in a secular, postcolonial nation" ("Interview").

I want to end with the film's ending, a highly ironic finale which poses a challenge to the political/aesthetic project the film itself articulates and, one might argue, to interpretations of the film such as the one I have been developing here as a Shakespearean/postcolonial critic. In the final sequence Arjun Raina, with the make-up which recalls his performance as a Kathakali dancer but with clothes which identify him as Peter Pillai, steps out of both these roles to directly address the director and ask him to stop filming. He says that he does not understand what the film is about. He claims that the film has no storyline: "You are making no story, sir". He reminds the director that "Kathakali is about story". He objects to the lack of any clear political/social message in the film. To Raina, this is some kind of "un-Indian" behaviour on the part of an Indian filmmaker ("What is this, sir? Is it not important? India [is an] important country, sir. We have to do some important social message thing"). The director, he continues, seems to be oblivious to the many problems that afflict contemporary India: "Everywhere, sir, there is so much hunger, sir, pain, poverty". In this sequence Raina no longer mockingly addresses the viewer, as he does in the Peter Pillai street act; he is *himself* the viewer, perhaps a simulation of the paradigmatic viewer, who offers a gut reaction to the film from inside the film. He claims for himself a position of authority, and this position of authority in relation to the film is not unlike the one the Athenian court occupies

vis-à-vis Quince's "Prologue"; a position of authority, of course, which his act of postcolonial mimicry has already inexorably put under erasure.

How to make sense of this 'performance'? To what extent is Raina still a character in the film? How does one draw the line between improvisation and simulation? Does he really step out of his roles, and in particular out his (self-)mocking role as Peter Pillai? (To Avikunthak, "in the last section of the film, Arjun Raina the actor and Peter Pillai the character in the film become one". "Interview"). There are no easy definite answers to these and other questions this section of the film raises. The final sequence is undoubtedly a highly self-reflexive moment, and even a self-deconstructive move on the director's part. But as with many other instances of 'deconstruction' in the film, this is not simply an iconoclastic negative moment. Avikunthak goes as far as to argue that "the film is simultaneously lost and resuscitated in this sequence…. In its collapse is its redemption" ("Interview"). *Dancing Othello* may not be, to return to and paraphrase Loomba's interpretation of what constitutes "truly intercultural work", a film whereby "Shakespeare remains 'in' Indian theatre and culture"; it may not be, because of its self-undermining gestures, "a medium for facilitating new kinds of Indian performances" (*SP*, 136). It is a film which articulates its own political/aesthetic project while raising questions about it, and at the very moment when it articulates it. It continually raises questions and boldly stays with them. Avikunthak's short movie is a visceral, highly rigorous and idiosyncratic engagement with the entanglements of contemporary intercultural performance which refuses to escape the intricacies of the present (post)colonial moment and its ghosts. It finally suggests that aesthetic and political problematisations *matter* more, and may be in the long run infinitely more rewarding than ready-made solutions.